

Writing on the high wire

Fiction

Sue McCauley

New Zealand Books Winter 2014

The Score Adrienne Jansen

Escalator Press, \$28.00, ISBN 978047325328

The Virgin & the Whale Carl Nixon

Vintage, \$38.00, ISBN 9781775533757

I'm Working on a Building Pip Adam

Victoria University Press, \$30.00, ISBN 9780864738981

When more than one book is featured in a review, does the order in which those books are first read have an impact on the reviewer's perceptions? I'm hoping it doesn't. But I can't quite rid myself of the feeling that, had I read them in reverse order, I might have felt better served.

In a sense, these novels represent the disparate strands of current New Zealand fiction. They arrived before Christmas; I was in the mood for pleasure and familiarity. Both Adrienne Jansen and Carl Nixon seemed to fit the bill. Nixon's novel had an enchanting pseudo-old-and-exotic-photo cover. "A touching, clever novel", promised the blurb. That "clever" rang out like a warning. I reached for Jansen and *The Score*.

Jansen has marked out for herself a territory that is uniquely hers. It's the difficult space where New Zealand immigrants struggle to come to grips with new lives and a new culture. Some of those immigrants, in time, may tell their own stories, but they will be stories based in the past. Jansen gives a present-day voice to the outsiders who live among us like good children, seen but not heard. She does this with respect, affection and considerable skill.

The Score is her third novel. There's a painterly quality about it: a canvas filled, Bruegel-like, with distinctly individual figures painted in fine detail, all of them busily doing things. There's a surface quality to the writing, yet the lives and interactions of the bunch of "migrants and misfits" tossed together in a block of Wellington council flats feel satisfyingly authentic.

Well, okay - the central pivot of the story could seem a bit of a Tui "yeah, right" moment; the tenant neighbours of Stefan, piano restorer and illegal immigrant, band together to help him repair a shattered grand piano and, in doing so, go some way towards mending their own fractured lives. A somewhat Disneyland plot, but Jansen skillfully turns it into a story that is both believable and slightly mythical. We want to believe, so we do - for *The Score* is a profoundly optimistic and good-hearted novel. There's no major action, yet tension is steadily maintained. The prose style is unobtrusive, accessible, geared towards making the reader feel entertained and respected.

Jansen's perspective is acute, despite the gentleness of tone. With or without intent, she leaves the reader with questions to ponder. The one that has stayed with me is: are immigrants better than the rest of us at living as a community? And, if so, why?

The Score is the first publication from Escalator Press, the newly created publishing arm of the Whitireia Creative Writing Programme. This is, in itself, another feel-good story, for it was Jansen who, 20 years ago, established the Writing Programme at Whitireia Polytechnic. But, serendipity aside, *The Score* would seem a fine way to launch a publishing press which aims to "provide a platform for compelling New Zealand writing". But, before eager and/ or desperate writers begin addressing envelopes, or composing emails to Escalator Press, I should point out that the stated intent is to "publish work by new and established writers associated with Whitireia".

The Score was dessert - a sweet and pleasing treat. *The Virgin & the Whale* was - deservedly - the main course. This is Nixon's third novel, but he's also a respected writer of short stories and stage plays. *The Virgin & the Whale* had an interesting inception, which is explained in what we once called a "foreword", but Nixon, with a nice simplicity, calls it "the beginning".

The events in the novel, he tells us, are (or were) true. Nixon was contacted by a stranger, whom he identifies as MN, who believed that the circumstances of his (MN's) parents getting together was a story that deserved to be told. As Nixon wryly observes, "being accosted by strangers armed with their life stories is a

hazard of the writing profession". But, this time, he was persuaded. In fact, he was "captivated" by this story about a nurse, mother of a young boy, and the wealthy returned serviceman she was employed to look after. Her husband had gone missing in battle (WWI) and not returned; the memory of her soldier-patient had suffered the same fate. The nurse invented, for her son, an episodic and imaginative adventure story about a balloonist who might be his absent father.

A love story, but also a story about the mystery of memory and medical misdiagnosis, and how imagination can go some way to fill a void. MN did well to choose Nixon, who writes careful, impeccable, unpretentious prose which has substance and is always reader-friendly. The story he was given has been moulded and crafted into a touching and memorable work of fiction.

But the author has added another dimension, making *The Virgin & the Whale* also a story about storytelling. I do wish he hadn't. Ever since, as a child, I first encountered "dear reader", I've hated novels where the author periodically parts the narrative and steps in to point out to us that what we (the readers) are absorbed in is a fictional construction. Why? Does the author suppose that readers are too thick to realise such things? Or is it an attempt to flatter us into believing that the author, in recognition of our superior perception, has chosen to confide in us? Either way, it always strikes me as an unwelcome intrusion; at worst, authorial attention-seeking, at best a blatant disregard for the unspoken contract between the novelist and the fiction reader. A contract that requires that, for the duration of the journey, belief in the story will be sustained by both parties.

Maybe, dear reader, like me, you will have observed that these intrusions on the story almost always include, or are entirely devoted to, respectful reflections on the ancient and honourable art of storytelling.

Not something I'd expected from Nixon, so I'll speculate on his reason. Three possibilities. He could have been trying to bulk out a tale that seemed less than novel-length. Or he may have been bowing to the local fashion for fiction to be about pushing the boundaries of technique and style. Third possibility: the business of building a novel from the reality of some living person's life - no matter how readily or eagerly it may have been offered up - is (I know this from experience) a much more troubling and complicated undertaking than creating a novel in the usual way: that is, from imagination plus scraps of experience, experienced or gleaned, or from impersonal history. Apart from anything else, it makes the author feel answerable to someone other than (or as well as) the reader. I can imagine Nixon, a writer of scruple, wrestling with questions of ownership and the slippery limits where fact and fiction meld.

I would guess it was a combination of those last two possibilities. As the publishing market for quality fiction diminishes, the pressure to turn prose into a performance, a kind of writerly trapeze act ("look at me, aren't I clever") constantly builds. Certainly, it would be a shame - for readers, anyway - if a writer of integrity like Nixon feels pressured into that kind of self-aware posturing.

I'm Working on a Building was the most promising title, but the last book I read. Bad decision. It should have been the entrée. A curious designer morsel, attractive but unfulfilling. Aside from the title, its virtues lie in novelty and presentation. Reflected (or maybe not, maybe just superimposed and upside-down) on the front cover is Dubai's trophy skyscraper, Burj Khalifa, while the back cover is certainly upside-down. Appropriately tricky, since the novel inside the covers is back-to-front: meaning it begins in the near future in West Coast New Zealand, and works back to when Catherine, the enigmatic and unengaging central character, is a child visiting Paris with her family. This can't be called a "conclusion" any more than the opening chapter is an "introduction". And the only things structural in this novel are the numerous buildings and buildings-in-progress that engineer Catherine works on in a (reverse) succession of countries.

In her author's note, Pip Adam explains that the book began as the "creative component of a PhD which asked: in what ways can the language of structural engineering inform, alter and enlarge fiction": (Not a question many of us have spent time pondering, so dearly a useful PhD subject.) No stated intent, let us note, to improve fiction.

So, this is the novel as a scientific experiment and on that basis it may well work. There is plenty of structural engineering language, informing and altering the prose in rather predictable ways (sterile, unbending, dense, calcified). Enlarging? I don't think so. But definitely tedium-inducing.

In the first chapter (ie the end of the story), Catherine's job is so bizarre it reads like an exercise in savage black humour. But readers should not get their hopes up - the only truly amusing part of the book is the publisher's claim that "everything becomes clearer in reverse".

Adam writes well, her collected short stories won awards, her prose is spare, vivid, descriptive. Taken individually, some of the chapters in *I'm Working on a Building* have an edgy merit. But no story is told. It isn't a novel, it's an experiment with prose in which the reader is (and feels) entirely irrelevant.

I can't imagine any other publisher seriously considering Adam's book for publication. But Adam's PhD in Creative Writing was gained at Victoria University, and it increasingly appears that, just as Escalator Press has set itself up as a Whitereia students-and-associates-first publisher, Victoria University Press now has a

policy of giving preference to Victoria's Creative Writing School graduates and tutors. If this wasn't widely perceived to be the case, there might be less need and demand for Escalator Press.

The difference in product reflects, and will doubtless continue to reflect, the kind of fiction the writing tutors at each institution favour and encourage: cutting-edge at Victoria, reader-friendly at Whitireia.

Sue McCauley's most recent novel is Tropic of Guile (2013).